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**The Digitisation of Advice and Welfare Benefits Services:
Re-imagining the Homeless User**

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The Digitisation of Advice and Welfare Benefits Services: Re-imagining the Homeless User

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Digitisation is transforming the way in which people in England access advice and welfare benefits. Face-to-face advice provision is being increasingly replaced by telephone and online services, whilst the online application and management of benefit claims has become mandatory within the introduction of Universal Credit. This paper argues that the current shift to digitisation fails to recognise the variation and complexity surrounding homeless people’s use of technology, with homeless people as technology users often placed into homogenising categories. Based on findings from qualitative interviews and observations carried out with homeless people and voluntary sector organisations, this paper discusses the social and contextual factors affecting homeless people’s use of technology for advice and benefit purposes. The paper highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of homeless people’s use of technology.

KEYWORDS: homelessness; technology; advice; welfare benefits; digitisation

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The Digitisation of Advice and Welfare Benefits Services: Re-imagining the Homeless User

Digitisation is transforming the way in which people in England access advice and welfare benefits. Face-to-face advice provision is being increasingly replaced by telephone and online services, whilst the online application and management of benefit claims has become mandatory within the introduction of Universal Credit. This paper argues that the current shift to digitisation fails to recognise the variation and complexity surrounding homeless people's use of technology, with homeless people as technology users often placed into homogenising categories. Based on findings from qualitative interviews and observations carried out with homeless people and voluntary sector organisations, this paper discusses the social and contextual factors affecting homeless people's use of technology for advice and benefit purposes. The paper highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of homeless people's use of technology.

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Introduction

Research has identified a significant European-wide increase in the use of technology to provide advice and other legal and public services (Smith and Patterson, 2014). These changes have been criticised for advocating a "one-size-fits all" approach to digitisation that could significantly disadvantage homeless and other vulnerable people (Yates, 2015).

Housing-related issues are one of the key areas for which people seek advice. Recent economic and policy changes indicate housing advice may play an increasingly important role in the prevention and alleviation of homelessness (Beatty *et al*, 2013;

Homeless Link, 2017).

In recent years homelessness in England has significantly increased. The sixth annual Homelessness Monitor (England) (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2017) indicates rising levels of rough sleeping, statutory homelessness, temporary accommodation placements, and hidden homelessness. This paper focuses specifically on homelessness support organisations and single homeless people. Statutory homelessness provisions in England are contained within the Homelessness Act 2002, which place duties on local authorities to provide housing for those who are homeless, eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless, and fall within specific priority need groups (e.g. households with dependent children). Single homeless people tend not to be granted priority need status, and therefore often rely on the homelessness sector for accommodation and other forms of support. Homeless Link's (2015: 49) annual review of the sector, suggests that funding cuts have resulted in 'many services struggling to maintain a good level of service on a lower budget'. It is within this context - of increased demand and diminishing resources - that these services now also face the challenge of helping people adapt to the recent rapid digitisation of advice and welfare benefit services.

As part of the Coalition (2010-2015) and current Government's deficit reduction programme, legislative reform and funding allocations are directing advice provision away from face-to-face assistance and towards telephone and online services. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) significantly limited the availability of face-to-face advice services, and implemented the Community Legal Advice Telephone Helpline as a mandatory single telephone gateway to access legal aid for certain areas of law. Under the new measures, those applying for legal aid must first undergo a telephone assessment, rather than being able to have an initial face-to-face

meeting with an advisor. Reflecting an international trend, telephone helplines now occupy a central role within the world of advice in England (Smith and Patterson, 2014: 23).

The shift towards digital channels has also assumed centre stage within the introduction of Universal Credit, which requires all benefit claims to be applied for and managed via an online account. In addition, since 2014 Jobcentre Plus (JCP) advisors can require Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) claimants to apply for jobs online via the Universal Jobmatch website¹ as part of the conditionality requirements attached to their claim. Failure to adhere to these requirements can lead to claimants being sanctioned, whereby their benefits are discontinued for a period of time. Being shut out of the benefit system for weeks or months at a time has devastating effects for individuals, and can result in survival crime, poverty, debt, mental and physical health problems and increased risk of social exclusion (Beazley, 2012; Beatty *et al*, 2015).

The digitisation of advice and welfare benefits has been strongly criticised for failing to consider inequalities in regards to information and communication technology (ICT) access, skills, and abilities (Balmer *et al*, 2012; Easton, 2014; Yates, 2015). Commentators have voiced concern about the scale and speed with which these changes are taking place, despite a distinct lack of evidence on the receptivity, deterrents, and successes of different channels of advice provision (Griffith and Burton, 2011; O'Hara, 2012; The Law Society, 2011). As explored within this paper, the digitisation of advice and welfare benefits appears to be based on generalised and homogeneous understandings of technology users. By failing to recognise the social and contextual

¹ On 14 May 2018 Universal Credit was replaced with a new 'Find a Job' online service

factors that affect interactions with digital systems, the reforms risk further marginalising some of society's most vulnerable members. In this paper, the term 'digital' refers to all systems and developments which rely on the Internet, telephone, or a combination of both.

It is often assumed that homeless people are digitally excluded and therefore likely to be negatively affected by an increasingly digitised world (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015). US literature has however shown many homeless people actively use technology in their everyday lives (e.g., Eyrich-Garg, 2010; 2011; Roberson and Nardi, 2010), and straightforward assumptions on digital exclusion have been said to vastly oversimplify the issue (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015: 2).

At present there is a distinct lack of literature which explores homeless people's engagement with digital technologies within an English context; this particularly in relation to advice and welfare benefits. Drawing on findings from observations and interviews carried out with homeless people and front-line support staff in three homelessness organisations in England, this paper addresses this gap in the literature and provides an alternative portrayal of homeless people as technology users. In place of generalised understandings of homeless people as digitally excluded and in place of systems which fail to acknowledge digital differences and divisions, this paper provides a story of complexity, diversity, and circumstantial trends as told by homeless people themselves and the organisations that support them. Grounded within people's lived everyday experiences, this paper aims to provide insight into the broad landscape of homelessness across which different technological interactions and perceptions takes place. Underpinned by a theoretical understanding of technology as a social process, the findings indicate that homeless people's use of technology for advice and benefit

purposes varies across certain key dimensions, including: i) the type of device being used, ii) generational differences, iii) purpose underscoring use, iv) personal circumstances, and v) support needs and abilities.

Homeless people and technology: current depictions

The introduction of the mandatory telephone gateway and the reductions in funding for face-to-face advice, are underscored by the belief that self-help channels of advice – such as telephone services or online information – offer a viable alternative to face-to-face provision (Denvir *et al*, 2011; MOJ, 2010). The professed benefits of ICT are considered to be so extensive, that the current digital by default policy agenda is based on notions that traditional modes of service delivery (such as face-to-face or paper interactions) are only justifiable under exceptional circumstances (Balmer *et al*, 2012: 64).

The digitisation of advice has been criticised for failing to consider the wide range of factors affecting people's use of technology, e.g., skills, support, purpose, autonomy, and equipment (Denvir *et al*, 2011: 97). Burton (2017) and Balmer *et al* (2012), offer two of the only available comparisons of telephone and face-to-face housing advice in England. The findings from Balmer *et al* (2012), suggests that for people experiencing housing and homelessness-related issues, telephone advice is less likely to be accessed, will be more time-consuming, and will lead to less beneficial outcomes. Burton (2017) found that particularly for vulnerable individuals and complex problems, face-to-face advice is associated with better client engagement and communication, and therefore higher quality advice. The Government's arguments in respect of the greater efficiency and effectiveness of telephone advice (MOJ, 2010), have been based on mere raw aggregated data from the Legal Service Commission,

without control having been applied for influential variables (Balmer *et al*, 2012). By failing to consider the contextual factors which impact people's use of telephone advice, those facing homelessness and housing issues are simply grouped together with other technology users. These particular factors raise concerns in regards to future accessibility and quality of advice for certain groups of people, with findings from Balmer *et al* (2012) and Burton (2017) indicating that homeless people could be at particular risk.

The importance of welfare benefits in the lives of homeless people is highlighted by Beatty *et al*, (2015: v), describing them as a 'vital lifeline to help people make the transition out of homelessness'. In response to Universal Credit, homelessness organisations have argued that inadequate access to necessary technologies, limited ICT-skills, literacy and English language barriers, as well as learning difficulties, make it exceeding difficult for many homeless people to apply and manage their claims online (Homeless Link, 2012; O'Hara, 2012; St Mungo's, 2012). In addition, as noted by Yates (2015: 160), limited time and resources appear to have been allocated to the development of alternative services, with an apparent lack of clarity in regards to who will be eligible for support in using these digital systems. The digitisation of advice and welfare benefits appears to be taking place without an adequate recognition of the specific ICT-related barriers as experienced by homeless people.

People experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, as well as those without Internet access at home, are often seen as occupying the "negative" side of "the digital divide" (Hersberger, 2002). Based on the assumption that homeless people have only limited access to technology and are therefore unlikely to use it or benefit from it, they are often seen as digitally excluded and representative of "the digital divide" (Guadagno

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3 *et al*, 2013; Miller *et al*, 2005). With some homeless people across Europe struggling
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5 with digital literacy and access, it can be reasoned that they may find themselves
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7 excluded from work, social, and housing opportunities that can increasingly only be
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9 accessed online (Striano, 2017). However, both popular and political discourses on
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11 digital exclusion all too often place technology users into homogenising categories
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13 (Sourbati, 2008: 96). International research has shown that seemingly common sense
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15 assumptions on digital exclusion or digital proficiency, often fails to recognise the
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17 diverse and complex ways in which various groups of people engage with technology
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19 (Denvir *et al*, 2011; Salemink, 2016; Sourbati, 2008).
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25 A small body of predominately US based literature has revealed that, contrary to
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27 popular opinion, many homeless people actively use technology in their everyday lives
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29 (Eyrich-Garg, 2011, 2010; Guadagno *et al*, 2013; Roberson and Nardi, 2010). Lemos
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31 and Frankenburg (2015) recently carried out the first large scale study of homeless
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33 people's use of digital technology in England. Out of the 341 homeless and ex-homeless
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35 people who took part in their study, 91 per cent owned a working phone, and 81 per
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37 cent used the Internet at least once a week. These findings suggest that a significant
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39 number of the people experiencing homelessness in England, make regular use of
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41 digital technologies.
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47 Research has shown that certain trends in the ownership, use, and barriers
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49 associated with digital technologies are associated with different aspects of the
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51 experience of homelessness (Humphry, 2014; Le Dantec and Edwards, 2008; Moser,
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53 2009). Homeless people have been found to use technology in their everyday lives for a
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55 variety of reasons, such as to maintain social connections, for community-based
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57 integration, communication with support staff, identity management, enhancing
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employment prospects, and to simply survive (Karabanow and Naylor, 2010; Le Dantec and Edwards, 2008; Moser, 2009). Homeless people also face barriers to using digital technologies. For example, the absence of a temporary or permanent residence has been associated with a lack of electrical points to charge phones (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015: 24), and a lack of a dry and safe place to use technology (Humphry, 2014: 47). Homeless people also face the possibility of theft in shelters (Lemos and Frankenburg, 2015: 49), and difficulty in storing artefacts, digital files, and media (Woelfer and Hendry, 2011).

The ICT-barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness, raises concerns regarding the possible negative impact of the current digital by default policy agenda. The prevalence of digital technologies amongst people experiencing homelessness, however also poses a challenge to general assumptions on digital exclusion. At present little is known about the use of technology by homeless people to access advice and welfare benefits, particularly within an English context. With technology playing an increasingly important role in mediating (and possibly hindering) homeless people's access to these vital resources, it is imperative to generate further understandings of their interactions with digital technologies within these specific contexts.

Technology as a social process

Government digital by default policy appears to be based on the assumption that a drive towards the digitisation of services, will necessarily bring about increased service efficiency and effectivity (Cabinet Office, 2013). The relationship between the production and impact of new digitised systems is hereby constructed as unidirectional and technology-led. This stance, along with the aforementioned lack of recognition of wider social and contextual factors underscoring the use of digital advice and benefit

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3 systems, suggests that these reforms are informed by deterministic understandings of
4 technology. Deterministic understandings consider technology to be an objective and
5 neutral force that produces effects independent of human and social influences (Berker
6 *et al*, 2006: 1; Grint and Woolgar, 1997: 15). These assumptions are often reflected
7 within e-government initiatives, which are frequently defined and pursued without
8 examinations of people's experiences of using and engaging with technology (Olsson *et*
9 *al*, 2003).

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12 A socio-constructivist approach offers an alternative way of understanding how
13 technology interacts with society and the role of the user within these processes, placing
14 technology in and among the complexities of everyday life (Richardson, 2009: 600).
15 The approach is underscored by the contrasting claim that technologies have no effect
16 outside processes of meaning making and the social and material context in which use
17 takes place (Grint and Woolgar, 1997: 10). The claim that social factors play a key role
18 within the use and impact of technologies, has been empirically substantiated by a
19 number of studies which, by applying a sociological analysis to technology,
20 demonstrate that different people use and interpret technology in a variety of ways
21 (Bakardjieva and Smith, 2001; Facer, 2011; Howard, 1998).

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23 Social constructivist approaches to technology contend that the design,
24 provision, use, and impact of technology all form part of a socio-dynamic process that
25 shapes the other within specific social contexts (Haddon *et al*, 2008: 1). Technological
26 systems are not seen as neutral, but rather as being inscribed with an array of meanings
27 and understandings; this particularly in regards to the user characteristics and patterns of
28 use (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). These assumptions underscore the practical
29 arrangement, appearance, and style of various digital artefacts and systems, as well as
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the regulations underscoring their use (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). Easton (2014) demonstrates that the Universal Credit online system is based on an under-developed understanding of the abilities and circumstances of the user, thereby rendering it inaccessible to many disabled people.

Socio-constructivist approaches to technology maintain that, in order to understand the nature, use, and impact of a technological system (whether a digitised information resource or an online job search web platform), it is crucial to focus on the people who actually use these technologies (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996; Wyatt *et al*, 2005). Building on the work of De Certeau (1984), this approach emphasises the importance of the way wherein artefacts and systems are appropriated and given meaning by users. By interpreting and using technology in certain ways, users often present a challenge to dominant discourses and assumptions that are embodied within different digital arrangements (Bakardjieva and Smith, 2001: 68; Facer, 2011: 7). This approach allows for a conceptualisation of homeless people as not simply passive consumers, but rather as playing a key role in negotiating the use, impact and meanings of technology.

Homeless people have been shown to negotiate the use and meanings of technology within the context of activities that form part of their everyday lives and experiences. For example, Woelfer and Hendry's (2011) study demonstrated that young homeless people's use and opinions of mobile phones for safety purposes, is situated within their daily experiences of navigating urban landscapes and potentially dangerous situations. It is essential to explore the details of people's lives into which digital technologies are appropriated, as it precisely these circumstances which affect people's interpretations and uses of technology (Haddon, 2004: 23).

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3 In recognising how homeless people negotiate and appropriate technologies in
4 their everyday lives, care must be taken to not slip into a form of ‘social determinism’
5 whereby the importance of material and structural constraint is side-lined (Grint and
6 Woolgar, 1997: 24-25). As previously mentioned, a number of studies have shown
7 homeless people’s interactions with technology to be significantly affected by the
8 experience of lacking resources and facing structural constraints (Humphry, 2014;
9 Karabanow and Naylor, 2010; Woelfer and Hendry, 2011). A key focus point of this
10 paper relates to how homeless people’s engagements with technology are affected by
11 the experience of homelessness as associated with certain material and social
12 conditions.
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28 **Research methods**

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30 This paper is based on findings from interviews and observations carried out in one city
31 in England in 2014–2015, involving three local homelessness organisations that provide
32 ICT-access and advice. This city was sampled as it has one of the highest levels of
33 homelessness in England², and has experienced a reduction in its face-to-face advice
34 services following legal aid cutbacks. The organisations were selected as being
35 representative of the main forms of homeless service provision in the local area and
36 consist of: a drop-in day centre, a Nightstop service providing emergency
37 accommodation for young people aged 18-24, and an organisation operating as a “one-
38 stop-shop” for education, training, health, and accommodation support services. A total
39 of 16 narrative interviews took place with homeless people who were accessing services
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² When measured by statutory homelessness acceptances and estimated numbers of rough
sleepers

at the three participating organisations, and 16 semi-structured interviews with staff and volunteers.

Within the narrative interviews with homeless people, the following ethnicities were represented: White British (n: 10); White European (no: 4); Black African (n: 1); and Black British (n: 1). Female participants (n: 3) were underrepresented in the sample, which was reflective of the gender ratio of people accessing participating services. Women will often remain in ‘hidden homeless’ situations, and rely on informal sources of support, rather than attend male dominated services (Crisis, 2008). Participants were recruited via a selective sampling approach, (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973: 39). With the exception of Nightstop, all interviews took place with individuals accessing ICT services, therefore possibly representing more “digitally included” participants. The narrative interviews, staff interviews and observations, did however provide in-depth insight into the experiences and difficulties of other homeless people in using technology and adapting to digitised benefit services. The staff members participating in the semi-structured interviews were sampled from different roles and services within each organisation and could therefore provide insight into the experiences of a wide array of service users.

Observation approaches are commonly used to explore the role of digital technologies in the lives of homeless people (e.g., Roberson and Nardi, 2010) as well as the use of technology within particular settings (for instance, in the workplace) (Heath and Luff, 2000). The adoption of a flexible observation framework allowed for a systematic description of the events, behaviours, and artefacts surrounding the provision and use of digital technology. Building on existing literature that addresses factors which affect people’s use of technology, the framework focused on material factors

which may not have emerged during the course of the interviews.

As previously discussed, in order to explore the role of technology, it must be placed within people's everyday lived experiences. Lived experiences can be seen as partly constructed within the stories that people tell about these experiences (Berger and Quinney, 2005). People occupying different locations will tell a particular type of story with variations that will reflect certain cultural and social meanings (Bazeley, 2013: 117). It is through drawing on these meanings, that a speaker will organise, represent, and construct their experiences within a narrative. A narrative approach consists of an unstructured in-depth interviewing method which aims to capture the perspectives of the participants in a direct manner. A narrative approach was therefore adopted in this study as a way of exploring how homeless people negotiate the meanings of technology in their everyday lives.

Denvir *et al* (2014: 674) argue that, in order to understand how people use the Internet to obtain advice or information on civil justice problems, it is important to consider 'an individual's help-seeking behaviour and the extent to which Internet use would ordinarily feature in this.' Interview participants were asked to recall a time when they needed housing advice or assistance (such as when first becoming homeless or at another time of their choosing). Following the narrative, further questions sought to explore their engagement with technology; this specifically in regards to their experiences with accessing advice and JSA³.

Interview analysis was informed by narrative analytical approaches using

³ At the time of data collection, Universal Credit had not yet been rolled out into the local area.

thematic analysis based on both *a priori* and *a posteriori* themes (Bazeley, 2013: 126). *A priori* codes included: general context; key actors/elements in the story and their interrelation; available resources; meanings of technology, understandings of homelessness and experiences; and the use and impact of technology. The *a posteriori* analytical categories and themes focused on the various dimensions of the experiences of homeless people in accessing advice, support, or benefits. Analysis focused on the ways in which digital artefacts, systems, and interactions featured within each of these dimensions.

Each stage of the data collection received ethical approval by the University of Bristol, School of Law Research Ethics Committee thereby outlining the risks and countermeasures in relation to: i) impact on participants; ii) collecting sensitive data; iii) undue influence iv) confidentiality and anonymity; and v) researcher safety. In this paper, all the names of participants (individuals and organisations) have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Re-imagining the homeless user

The remainder of the paper explores the findings of the interviews and observations which indicate that homeless people’s use of technology to access advice, information, and welfare benefits varies across certain key dimensions. Informed by a theoretical understanding of technology as a social process, focus is awarded to how the participants, via alternative interpretations and applications of technology, negotiate, contest, and express the assumptions embedded within digitised benefit systems.

Questions of access: mobile phones v computers

Discrepancies in ownership and access to different *types* of technological devices were

found to impact homeless people's ability to successfully manage their benefit claims. All but one participant owned a mobile phone (eight owned a smartphone), with one respondent owning a personal laptop. Lemos and Frankenburg's (2015) study similarly found that, while the wider English population tends to prefer laptops for accessing the Internet, homeless people will more likely rely on smartphones or desktop computers. Daniel, lacking both home Internet access and money to catch the bus to services, is one of three participants in this study who struggled to manage their JSA claims via their smartphones:

There's a lot to fill out and my phone's ok, but yea, it took ages – I mean, they did say, it will take about half an hour, but that's when you've got like a big screen and you can type stuff but like I'm an old lady with technology, so I had to do it on my phone and kind of tap things in and expand the screen and shrink the screen, and you know, it took ages to load, it was annoying. (Daniel, homeless, aged 18-24)

In the absence of a mobile-friendly version of the Universal Jobmatch website, applying for JSA via a smartphone is a time-consuming and frustrating process which leaves significant room for error. Other barriers to using mobiles included a lack of places to charge phones, the short battery lifespan of smartphones, and data restrictions.

Five participants managed their JSA claim via a desktop computer at a public access point or at one of the participating organisations. These participants did however encounter other barriers such as limited opening hours, lack of appropriate training, and limited computer access.

An understanding of technology as a social process, covers the notion that understandings are embedded within digital systems, which are in turn negotiated by users (Bakardjieva and Smith, 2001). Within their narratives, participants discussed how resource barriers make it extremely difficult for homeless people to manage benefit

claims online. These difficulties were presented as stemming from assumptions on universal access, skills and abilities:

There's no thought to giving them computers, Internet access or anything else. It's just do this online for three days a week or something otherwise we'll sanction you.
(Support worker, drop-in centre)

Participants considered the digitisation of welfare benefits to place a significant burden on homeless people, believing it to be informed by assumptions and expectations which are at odds with the lived reality of many homeless people. By presenting alternative interpretations of the process of claiming benefits online, participants can be seen to challenge assumptions underpinning the shift to digitisation. The notion that individuals should take full responsibility for adhering to the new online search requirements, was contested in favour of arguments that the necessary resources should be made available:

I don't think there's enough services around to offer people the chance to use the Internet for free ... you can't be like, "well, you need to do this, but we're not going to give you any access to do that, so good luck with that", kind of thing.
(Adam, homeless, aged 18-24)

One respondent noted that computer access at the local central JCP office had been scaled back and that many of the phones that were previously available to contact employers had also been removed. This appeared to raise suspicion among some of participants that a digital welfare benefit system is part of a wider structure which works against them:

There's an organisation that wants you to get into employment but they've taken out the machines which you need to get the information. Also the government site has very basic information and you ask yourself, do these people actually want you to get a job? (Colin, homeless, aged 55-64)

Four participants stated that these ICT-related barriers made it impossible for them to meet the conditions of their claim, thus causing them to get sanctioned. Research suggests that homeless claimants are being sanctioned to a disproportional degree, with inadequate access being cited as a key barrier in meeting the requirements of an increasingly stringent conditionality regime (Beatty *et al*, 2015). These findings suggest that the DWP's emphasis on using the Internet for job searches puts homeless people struggling with regular access to the Internet and computers at a significant disadvantage.

Generational differences

Age was a key socio-demographic variation affecting homeless people's use of technology to access to advice and welfare benefits. Support staff and homeless participants referred to age-related discrepancies in ICT-skills, and reasoned that as a result, the digitisation of welfare benefits is having a disproportional impact on the older generation:

I didn't keep up with technology, I come from an era when technology was in its infancy and it was generally seen as a novel item ... people have been sanctioned not through their own fault, just because they can't use computers ... my peer group and older are on a very fine edge. (Victor, homeless, aged 55-64)

Certain conceptualisations of user characteristics will be incorporated within the design of a particular digital artefact or system (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996: 44).

Participants felt that the shift to digital benefit systems was underscored by assumptions of the user as someone who is innately proficient with technology. In the interviews, participants can be seen to challenge the homogenising expectations associated with the digitisation of benefits, which seemingly construct all jobseekers as competent ICT users:

At the job centre there's only one computer and that's just for job search not to train you up on computers ... it's like you're supposed to know everything like you were born with technology in your head. (Victor, homeless, aged 55-64)

Today's generation of young people are popularly considered to be 'digital natives'; individuals who from an early age have been immersed in digital technology and are therefore proficient and interested in technology (Bennett *et al*, 2008: 775). However, being familiar with computers or using them regularly, does not necessarily equate to an ability to successfully manage benefit claims online. A number of younger participants (aged 18-24) who used computers and the Internet daily still struggled with the Universal Jobmatch website. They used the Internet primarily for social media, while tasks such as uploading a CV and applying and searching for jobs proved challenging. Other research indicates significant diversity within the skills, interests, knowledge, and use of technologies by young people (Bennett *et al*, 2008).

Staff also reported that despite being avid smartphone users, young people often lacked the confidence to communicate with housing professionals via the telephone. This serves to again problematise straightforward assumptions on digital proficiency among young people, and further illustrates the importance of social and contextual factors which affect people's use of technology. Denvir *et al* (2011) found that, although young people do have high rates of Internet access, they seldom use the Internet for advice or information on problems with a legal dimension. An increased and indiscriminate reliance on online advice services, could effectively serve to exclude certain groups of people (Denvir *et al*, 2011: 97). This also challenges the assumption commonly found within e-government initiatives that replacing more traditional modes of service delivery with digital communications is unequivocally advantageous (Sourbati, 2008).

Purpose of use: information v advice

The understanding of technology as a social process, suggests that in order to understand the role of digital technologies, its negotiation within people's everyday activities needs to be examined (De Certeau, 1984). This in turn allows for an examination of the social and material contextual factors which impact technological appropriations (Vuojarvi *et al*, 2010).

The findings suggest that when people are seeking housing or homelessness advice, there is a lack of available information, particularly when first becoming homeless. Participants' awareness of and ability to access advice and information varied considerably according to their access to certain key resources such as: i) personal or professional networks, ii) familiarity with the local area, iii) physical capability, and iv) time available.

For some of the participants, mobile phones figured as devices which enabled them to transcend various spatial, temporal, and physical constraints. For example, some of the younger participants who had no knowledge of local service provisions, used Google maps on their smartphones to locate organisations:

I didn't know my way round, so yeah, if it wasn't for my phone ... I could have looked at the library, but again I can't memorise a map and I didn't have anywhere to print anything off, so yeah, no, it was challenging, so, yeah, I am grateful I had my phone, definitely. (Daniel, homeless, aged 18-24)

The four participants who used the Internet to search for information on local services and for housing rights and options, generally ended up looking at the Local Council's homelessness advice web pages. These participants did however feel that relevant

information was difficult to locate, unclear, or generally inapplicable to their personal circumstances. As a result, some participants came to regard the Internet as a tool by means of which information is intentionally hidden:

I can't even remember what it came out with, benefiting from that [council] website, to be honest, didn't really help – I went through all the links – nothing really ... I think more or less they're trying to discourage people from leaving their houses. (George, homeless, aged 18-24)

Whilst some participants reasoned that the Internet could be used to better advertise and spread awareness and information on support services, other views were expressed in relation to advice. The provision of information tends to be a one-off or at least time-limited communication of knowledge, facts, and ideas, while advice work, with people being provided with suggestions or views on the best course of action, will generally entail a more time-consuming process (Dunning, 2005: 12). Participants in this study expressed a clear preference for face-to-face advice:

So basically [face-to-face meetings] it's very important because you feel more, like once you meet them, like you got what you needed from it, rather than speaking on the phone and hoping maybe you'll get some help but actually you didn't. (Arthur, homeless, aged 35-44)

Many participants spoke of having to wait for an extended period of time for landlords, estate agencies, or other professionals to return phone call and/or emails, which in turn exacerbated feelings of stress and anxiety. Face-to-face communications were therefore seen as a more immediate and reliable source of advice. Within research for Shelter (TNS, 2015: 3), heightened feelings of anxiety or distress framed the help people valued most in their interactions with advisors; as also reiterated by participants in this study:

When you're in a place like that, basically it [face-to-face] is very important, like

you just seeing someone and like seeing them hear you makes you feel tons better ... I feel it's more personal rather than just like say on the phone, it's business, but face-to-face it's more like better for you. (Daniel, homeless, aged 18-24)

Participants' experiences of trying to access support, include notions of advice and information being intentionally hidden, the importance of human interactions, and feelings of vulnerability and frustration at having to wait for interminable periods of time. These experiences and understanding, as well as available resources, impact homeless people's uses and views of technology for advice and information purposes. These findings illustrate the importance of considering the material and interpretive context in which the uses and meanings of technology are negotiated (Grint and Woolgar, 1997).

Personal circumstances: in a crisis v long-term needs

Earlier research has shown people to generally seek housing advice at 'critical moments'; times which are characterised by a sense of urgency and emotional distress (TNS, 2015: 10). The crisis situations that many participants in this study faced, as well as associated experiences of vulnerability, caused participants to regard human interactions as a crucial aspect of advice provision. Staff participating in this study argued that face-to-face advice is particularly important when people face a crisis situation:

Newly homeless people [are] absolutely petrified. The level of anxiety and stress we see is massive. I've seen young women where their whole body is shaking, I sometimes think they're going to faint ... if you're actually literally on the street, the proper definition you know sleeping rough, there's a real limit I would suggest to technology. (Staff member, nightstop)

Computers and the Internet were argued by some staff to only have limited relevance

when people first become homeless. In this study staff referred to homelessness as comprising different stages, with technology being seen as more important in later phases; this particularly when addressing homeless people's long-term employment needs.

Employers are very unlikely to take someone on who has got no IT-skills at all. I think they would at least expect someone to be able to read an email and how to access it. (Staff member, one-stop-shop service).

A few homeless people did however argue that while they were sleeping rough, access to mobile phones and the Internet were essential in accessing or maintaining employment:

I may be street homeless but I have a job and a mobile phone. I worked for 2 weeks to get a mobile. Without mobile I can't get a job. (Iwan, homeless, age 35-44)

The majority of homeless participants were initially somewhat sceptical of the role of technology within the lives of homeless people; particularly when people first become homeless. In light of (especially) the younger participants' strategic use of the Internet to circumvent resource constraints and locate information when first becoming homeless (as discussed above), these views initially seemed somewhat contradictory. Within the narratives it also became abundantly clear that mobile phones do play a key role in facilitating communication between participants and support agencies. However, their importance only became apparent when participants were prompted with the question: *'How important was it for you to have a mobile during this time?'*, thereby suggesting that the role of mobile phones in accessing information and support may be somewhat invisible and taken for granted.

Complex and diverse support needs and abilities

Individual skills, abilities, and support needs are key factors in differentiating homeless people's use of technology. At Nightstop, staff reported that most of the young people they work with are relatively "low risk"⁴, for the most part 'newly homeless' and have lower support needs (e.g. in relation to substance misuse).

Staff additionally reasoned that when compared to older homeless people, young people are more likely to have grown up using technology. These differing support needs and prior engagement with technology are said to constitute higher levels of engagement with technology. This can be contrasted to many of the people visiting the drop-in centre, who were reported by staff to present with an array of complex support needs, such as alcohol and drug dependency. Staff reported that the 'common denominator' among drop-in centre visitors was their 'chaotic lifestyles', impacting their ability to keep appointments and follow routines:

So – and that's quite a regular occurrence that they'll say, "Can I use the computers?" and they'll often say themselves, this afternoon, and I'll say, "Yeah but you can do it now if you want". "No no, I'll come back this afternoon". They don't come back. (Staff member, drop-in centre)

Many of the drop-in centre visitors were said to struggle with timely and regular use of the computers, which then affected their ability to adhere to online job search requirements. Within their narratives, participants presented the digitisation of welfare benefits as having been informed by misplaced and problematic assumptions on rational

⁴ Homelessness accommodation services will usually carry out a risk assessment of client's behaviour and support needs.

and conforming behaviour:

They [the government] assume you can just go to the library and use it [computers] and that you'll do this and that, but for some people that are homeless, you can't just go the library everyday ... you've got more important things to do ... so their mindset's gonna be, I ain't gonna bother, I've got to look for somewhere to stay.
(Henry, homeless, aged 25-34)

Participants challenged the portrayal of unemployed people as rational actors who straightforwardly take the necessary steps to conform to the channel shift, and argued that some homeless people simply have other priorities. The participants stressed that due to the failure to take the lived experience of homeless people into account, the digitisation of welfare benefits can act as a deterrent in claiming benefits.

Staff at the drop-in centre reported both a general '*Fear of officialdom*' (Staff member, drop-in centre) and mental health issues to also be particularly prevalent among people using their services. For these users, interactions with technology can lead to feelings of anxiety and paranoia:

When it comes up asking for personal information they believe that machine is trying to get inside their head. So that's a whole other set of issues we then have to deal with ... if it's slow printing out for them it's because it's being routed to whoever is trying to steal their ideas and to us that just seems right out there, but in the moment with the person who is doing that, that's reality. (Staff member, drop-in centre)

Many people at the drop-in centre were found to have very limited IT-skills, with staff having to provide intensive one-to-one support, which included explanations of basic processes such as how to switch the computer on. At the "one-stop-shop" service participating in this study, people struggling with English language or literacy issues were also found to require particularly high levels of support in managing an online

benefit claim.

Participants who identified themselves as having limited IT-skills criticised the scale and speed with which the shift to digital benefit claims has taken place, and saw it as incongruous with the time it takes to acquire new skills. Participants who struggled to manage their JSA claim online, associated the current digitisation of welfare benefits with feelings of social exclusion, anxiety, and emotional distress:

I find myself under immense pressure to use computers and it's stressing me out.
You end up feeling socially detached from society ... It's become a very scary world. All your life you're speaking one language and then suddenly there's a new language. (Marcus, homeless, aged 55-64)

Within this study, the need of some users for very intensive support was shown to be particularly resource-intensive for the participating organisations. The digitisation of JSA claims is said to have put a considerable burden on homelessness organisations in the local area: 'Basically the Job Centre is pushing loads of work on agencies helping people with employment.' (staff member, one-stop-shop service)

These findings support other arguments that the digitisation of welfare benefits may be displacing costs onto the voluntary sector (Beazley, 2012: 7), and thereby placing further pressure on organisations which are already struggling to meet increased demand with limited resources.

Empowerment potential of digital technologies

Digital technologies can be seen to carry a dual role within homeless people's experiences. Whilst digital technologies were associated with restricted access to advice, support and welfare benefits, they were also used by participants to navigate the barriers, rules, regulations, and unequal power relationships they encountered.

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3 Within their narratives, several participants commented on their (largely
4
5 unsuccessful) attempts to access housing and/or advice. Within these experiences, some
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7 participants spoke of being subjected to moralistic judgements on the causes and nature
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9 of homelessness:
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13 Just because I ain't got a beard and half a liver doesn't mean I don't need help.
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15 There must be loads of people who are terribly lost. (Arthur, homeless, aged 35-44)
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18 Certain participants saw the Internet as a tool with which they could eventually
19
20 challenge dominant conceptualisations and assumptions on homelessness. Arthur
21
22 intends to eventually use Internet blogs and social media platforms to present alternative
23
24 understandings of homelessness, and to highlight the immense difficulties that many
25
26 homeless people face in trying to get help:
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30 It's so unfair! Once I'm sorted I'll be shouting from the rooftops! Putting it online,
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32 writing blogs. I'll be putting it everywhere. (Arthur, homeless, aged 35-44)
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35 Although many respondents were highly averse to completing their job searches online
36
37 because of the barriers discussed above, three participants preferred completing their
38
39 JSA claim online rather than on paper. Two participants claimed to find it quicker and
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41 easier, and the other respondent felt that the completing of paper applications at the JCP
42
43 office had actually functioned as a barrier:
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47 At first, I didn't like it, cause I was like on and off with signing on. Like I wouldn't
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49 go in there cause I didn't like how they spoke to me and all that, and I'd end up
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51 getting in debt with council tax and housing benefit ... yeah now I'm using it and
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53 doing it and all that, it is actually pretty easy. (Henry, homeless, age 25-34)
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55 Henry's reluctance to visit the JCP office resulted in JSA sanctions, housing benefit
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57 arrears, and eviction from his supported housing accommodation. Henry's story
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3 contributes to a small body of evidence which suggests that JSA sanctions may increase
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5 the risk of homelessness (Batty *et al*, 2015).
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9 Power is seen as being invested in particular buildings and institutions, as in
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11 order to receive his benefits and not face the risk of sanctions, Henry had no choice but
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13 to visit the JCP. In Henry's case, the Internet was seen as a means to minimise face-to-
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15 face contact with JCP advisors and in turn lead to better adherence to JSA conditionality
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17 requirements. In this instance the Internet can be regarded as a source of empowerment.
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20 21 22 **Conclusion**

23
24 Popular discourses which assume that homeless people are per definition digitally
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26 excluded, obscure the complexities and variations surrounding homeless people's use of
27
28 technology. Homeless people are not a homogenous group of technology users who are
29
30 simply 'out there'. As noted by Neale (1997: 48), a significant amount of research has
31
32 shown extensive diversity among the needs, circumstances, characteristics, and histories
33
34 of homeless people. The term 'homelessness' covers a diversity of people, presenting a
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36 wide range of circumstances, personal characteristics, needs, abilities, priorities, and
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38 experiences with technology. These multifarious characteristics and experiences in turn
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40 underscore homeless people's use and perceptions of technology, which this paper has
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42 shown to be complex and multi-faceted. Digital technologies cannot be seen as
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44 deterministic or as being outside of society, automatically producing universal effects
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46 and identical types of engagements (or non-engagements). The use, meaning, and
47
48 impact of digital technologies are rather deeply embedded within, as well as negotiated
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50 within, the context of people's everyday lives and circumstances (Grint and Woolgar,
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52 1997).
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Given the wide diversity of preferences, opinions, and uses of

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3 technology within the experiences of homeless people, this paper highlights the need for
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5 governments across Europe to present alternative options within the development of
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7 digital services, which cater to users with varying abilities, circumstances, needs, and
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9 preferences. Given that the role and importance of technologies within the experiences
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11 of homeless people are likely to vary according to their particular circumstances, from a
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13 best practice perspective, provisions should be made for technology to cater to different
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15 needs, capabilities, and circumstances.
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20 A theoretical conceptualisation of technology as a social process, covers the
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22 notion that certain understandings have been embedded in the design, production, and
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24 regulation of digital artefacts and systems, which are in turn negotiated by the users.
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26 Within the digitisation of advice and welfare benefits in England, assumptions seem to
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28 dictate that users as a matter of course, have regular access to a desktop computer, the
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30 skills and confidence to independently manage claims online, the needed literacy and
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32 cognitive abilities to navigate complex websites, the time and resources to visit a
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34 library, and the stability, security, and support to do all of the above on a regular basis.
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36 This paper indicates however that many homeless people simply cannot meet the above
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38 criteria, and suggests that, in making ICT use mandatory, homeless people will face
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40 significant barriers in trying to access welfare benefits online. These findings suggest
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42 that as technology comes to occupy an increasingly prominent role internationally
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44 within the provision of advice and other public and legal services, attention should be
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46 paid to the manner wherein varying social, material, and circumstantial trends within
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48 the lives of different groups of people, affect the nature, use, and impact of these
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50 systems.
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58 Findings suggest that when people first become homeless, self-service digital
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3 channels of advice provision may not be suitable. At that point many people find
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5 themselves in a crisis situation and are enveloped by feelings of urgency and emotional
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7 distress, which lead to a distinct preference and need for face-to-face advice. The
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9 complexity of the participants' experiences and the intricacies of the process of
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11 navigating homelessness support systems, imply that human interactions and human
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13 communications are of vital importance in ensuring that homeless people receive timely
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15 and appropriate support. This further problematises the assumption that digital
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17 communications offer a viable and straightforward substitute for face-to-face
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19 interactions.
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25 Given the increased focus on prevention, as advocated within national and local
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27 homelessness policies in England, it should be of particular concern to policy makers
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29 that sanctions may actually increase the risk of homelessness (Batty *et al*, 2015). With
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31 Universal Credit still being rolled out, the introduction of its online element implies a
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33 need for a thorough exploration of any accompanying exclusionary effects on homeless
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35 people. The findings highlight the need for adequate alternatives within e-government
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37 initiatives for those who cannot independently use online systems.
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42 The findings indicate that the core assumptions underscoring current digital by
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44 default policies warrant re-examining. Notions of digitised services being necessarily
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46 more efficient, effective, and preferred by the public at large when compared to
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48 traditional channels of service provision, do not resonate with the lived reality of many
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50 homeless people. If digital by default policies genuinely aim to create 'digital services
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52 that are so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them will choose
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54 to do so *whilst those who can't are not excluded*' (Cabinet Office, 2012: 5, emphasis
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56 added), adequate attention should be paid to the manner wherein varying social,
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material, and circumstantial trends within the lives of different groups of people, affect the nature, use, and impact of these systems.

Word Count: 7,991

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